

## Message Text

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 01 DACCA 02641 01 OF 02 301132Z

42

ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 SAJ-01 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-03

H-02 INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02

SS-15 USIA-06 EA-06 SAM-01 IO-10 EB-07 TRSE-00 OMB-01

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R 300550Z MAY 75

FM AMEMBASSY DACCA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6921

INFO AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD

AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

AMCONSUL CALCUTTA

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 DACCA 2641

EO 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, BG

SUBJECT: PRESS FREEDOM WANING

REF: DACCA 2371 & 2618

SUMMARY: SHEIKH MUJIB'S INTENTION TO ESTABLISH A SMALL, WELL-CONTROLLED PRESS HAS LONG BEEN RUMORED. THE ARREST OF ENAYETULLAH KHAN AND CLOSURE OF HIS WEEKLY HOLIDAY WERE SEEN AS FIRST CONCRETE STEPS IN THIS DIRECTION. SUBSEQUENT "APPLICATION" FOR BAKSAL MEMBERSHIP BY MIXED BAG OF JOURNALISTS NOW SUGGESTS PRESSMEN READING WRITING ON WALL, AND THAT SOME ARE ENDEAVORING TO INSURE THEIR EMPLOYMENT. ALL INDICATIONS POINT TOWARD EARLY END TO BANGLADESH'S ALREADY FEEBLE GRIP ON PRESS FREEDOM. END SUMMARY.

1. SINCE MUJIB ASSUMED THE PRESIDENCY AND DECLARED A ONE-PARTY STATE EARLIER THIS YEAR, RUMORS HAVE BEEN CURRENT THAT HE INTENDS TO CONSOLIDATE THE PRESS AS WELL, CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 02 DACCA 02641 01 OF 02 301132Z

ESTABLISHING A SMALL GOVERNMENT-AND PARTY-CONTROLLED

SYSTEM OF NEWSPAPERS. MUJIB, MINISTERS, AND PARTY LEADERS HAVE BEEN PREPARING THE GROUND FOR THIS NEW SYSTEM BY EMPHASIZING THE INEFFICIENCY AND COUNTERPRODUCTIVENESS OF THE PRESENT NUMBER OF NEWSPAPERS AND AT THE SAME TIME REASSURING JOURNALISTS THAT NONE WILL GO JOBLESS. WITH THE ARREST OF ENAYETULLAH KHAN (DACCA 2371) AND THE CLOSING OF HIS NEWSPAPER HOLIDAY, MUJIB MADE CLEAR THAT THE DAYS OF AN INDEPENDENT PRESS ARE NUMBERED. THEN, IN A TYPICAL CARROT-AND-STICK FASHION, MUJIB INDICATED THAT THERE WAS A PLACE FOR FAITHFUL JOURNALISTS IN BAKSAL.

2. OBVIOUSLY IN PART TO COUNTER FEARS GENERATED BY ENAYETULLAH'S ARREST AND TO CREATE THE APPEARANCE OF SUPPORT FOR THE SECOND REVOLUTION, THE BDG UNDERTOOK A CAMPAIGN TO SIGN UP JOURNALISTS TO A PETITION SEEKING MEMBERSHIP IN BAKSAL. THE 224 JOURNALISTS WHO HAVE SIGNED SO FAR (MORE THAN ONE-HALF OF THE DACCA PRESS CORPS) WERE REWARDED MAY 23 WITH AN AUDIENCE WITH MUJIB. ACCORDING TO BANNER-HEADLINED PRESS ACCOUNTS, MUJIB URGED THE JOURNALISTS TO "USE THEIR PEN AGAINST" CORRUPTION AND TO INSPIRE THE UNITY OF THE PEOPLE. HE DISCUSSED PLANS TO CONSOLIDATE THE PRESS, ASSURED JOURNALISTS THAT NONE WOULD BE JOBLESS, AND THANKED THEM FOR THEIR COOPERATION.

3. IN THE MEANTIME, THE UNCOOPERATIVE ENAYETULLAH KHAN REMAINS IN A "FIRST-CELL" JAIL CELL IN SYLHET. ACCORDING TO A MEMBER OF A JOURNALISTS' DELEGATION WHICH CALLED ON MUJIB, THE PRESIDENT REFERRED TO HIS OWN LONG YEARS IN JAIL AND SAID THAT HE HAD SENT ENAYETULLAH TO SYLHET SO THAT HE COULD EXPERIENCE FIRST HAND THE SEPARATIST MOVEMENT -- AN OBVIOUS ALLUSION TO THE LETTER FROM SYLHETI DISSIDENTS PUBLISHED BY HOLIDAY. THE PREVALENT VIEW HERE IS THAT, IN ADDITION TO THE SYLHETI ISSUE, REPEATED PRESSURE FROM THE SOVIETS AND COMPLAINT FROM THE INDIAN HIGH COMMISSIONER RE HOLIDAY'S REPORTING ON SIKKIM PROMPTED MUJIB TO JAIL ENAYETULLAH. HOLIDAY HAS BEEN IN TROUBLE BEFORE; IN 1973 PUBLICATION WAS SUSPENDED FOR SOME WEEKS AND A WARRANT ISSUED AGAINST ENAYETULLAH FOR SEDITION. THE ARREST TAKES ON MORE SIGNIFICANCE NOW, HOWEVER, NOT ONLY BECAUSE OF GOVERNMENT PLANS TO REVAMP

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 DACCA 02641 01 OF 02 301132Z

THE PRESS BUT ALSO BECAUSE OF ENAYETULLAH'S PROMINENCE IN BOTH OPPOSITION POLITICS AND THE PRESS COMMUNITY.

4. AT THE MAY 23 MEETING WITH JOURNALISTS, MUJIB CONFIRMED THAT THERE WOULD BE A LIMITED OF DAILY NEWSPAPERS IN DACCA AND SEVERAL OTHER CITIES IN BANGLADESH, AND WEEKLY NEWSPAPERS FOR EACH OF BAKSAL'S FRONT GROUPS. CURRENT SPECULATION IS THAT THERE WILL BE TWO

BANGLA PAPERS IN DACCA, ONE REPRESENTING BAKSAL AND THE OTHER THE GOVERNMENT, AND TWO ENGLISH PAPERS WITH SIMILAR ORIENTATION. AMONG THE NEWSPAPERS LIKELY TO SURVIVE ARE SHEIKH FAZLUL HUG MONI'S BANLADESH TIMES AS BAKSAL'S ENGLISH DAILY AND HIS BANGLAR BANI AS A WEEKLY ORGAN OF THE LABOR FRONT. JANOPAD, PARTLY OWNED AND CLOSELY SUPERVISED BY INDUSTRIES MINISTER KAMARUZZAMAN, AND THE PRO-SOVIET NAP/M-LINKED SANGBAD ARE ALSO EXPECTED TO BECOME WEEKLIES. ALL FOUR OF THESE NEWSPAPERS HAVE BEEN VITRIOLICALLY CRITICAL OF THE UNITED STATES IN RECENT MONTHS.

5. ONE NEWSPAPER, HOWEVER, IS CREATING PROBLEMS FOR MUJIB IN IMPLEMENTING HIS PLAN. IT IS CLEAR BY NOW THAT MUJIB WOULD LIKE ITTEFAG, LARGEST CIRCULATION PAPER AND LONG A SUPPORTER OF THE AWAMI LEAGUE, TO BECOME VOLUNTARILY THE BAKSAL BANGLA DAILY; ITTEFAG EDITOR ANWAR HOSAAIN MONJU WANTS TO RETAIN HIS INDEPENDENCE. MUJIB HAS GIVEN CONTRADICTORY SIGNALS ON ITTEFAG'S FUTURE TO EDITOR HOSSAIN. A MONTH AGO, MUJIB IMPLIED THAT HE COULD NOT POSSIBLY TAKE OVER ITTEFAG. YET AFTER ANOTHER CONVERSATION WITH THE PRESIDETN LAST WEEK, HOSSAIN TOLD THE IO THAT "YOU CAN'T PUBLISH A NEWSPAPER IN BANGLADESH."

6. LIKE ALL NEWSPAPERS HERE, ITTEFAG IS OPERATING UNDER THE THREAT OF EMERGENCY POWERS AND HOSSAIN HAS LOPG BEEN CAREFUL TO SO PHRASE HIS CRITICISMS OF THE GOVERNMENT AND THE SOVIET UNION AND BALANCE HIS COVERAGE WITH PRAISE FOR MUJIB AND THE BDG THAT HE HAS BEEN ABLE SO FAR TO DEFEND HIS PAPER AGAINST COMPLAINTS. IN GENERAL, HOWEVER, IN THE DACCA PRESS, LESS LOCAL NEWS IS BEING PUBLISHED, LITTLE OR NO CIRTICISM OF THE GOVERNMENT APPEARS, AND EDITORIAL COMMENT ON FOREIGNVAFFAIRS HEWS CLOSELY TO CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 04 DACCA 02641 01 OF 02 301132Z

THE PRO-SOCIALIST, PRO-LIBERATIONIST, AND ANTI-IMPERIALIST SLANT ADVOCATED BY THE MORE VOCIFEROUS LEADERS OF BAKSAL.

7. THE BDG HAS ALWAYS EXERTED CONTROL OVER THE PRESS THROUGH ITS DISTRIBUTION OF GOVERNMENT ADVERTISING AND NEWSPRINT. BY MANIPULATING THE PRESS AND PUBLICATION LAWS, IT HAS PUT NEWSPAPERS OUT OF BUSINESS AND JAILED EDITORS FOR VARIOUS OFFENSES. IN ADDITION, IT HAS BEEN BDG PRACTICE TO BRIEF THE PRESS ON HWO TO PLAY CERTAIN EVENTS. LAST WEEK, FOR INSTANCE, THE PRESS INFORMATION DEPARTMENT TOLD NEWSPAPERS TO PLAY UP ANTI-PAKISTAN ARTICLES, WHICH PROMPTLY RESULTED IN A BRIEF-LIVED SPATE OF FRONTPAGE STORIES ON REPRESSION IN BALUCHISHTAN AND THE NWFP.

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PAGE 01 DACCA 02641 02 OF 02 300844Z

10

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INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 SAJ-01 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-03

H-02 INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02

SS-15 USIA-06 EA-06 SAM-01 IO-10 EB-07 TRSE-00 OMB-01

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R 300550Z MAY 75

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 DACCA 2641

8. IN THE PAST FEW MONTHS, WE HAVE NOTICED AS WELL A DECLINE IN USE OF WIRE SERVICE FOREIGN REPORTS WHICH MIGHT REFLECT ADVERSELY UPON BDG'S BLOC AND THIRD WORLD ALLIES, OR GIVE A MORE BALANCED PICTURE OF USG POLICY PROGRAMS, AND AN INCREASE IN USE OF TASS MATERIAL (SEE DACCA 2618). FOR INSTANCE, THE LOCAL PRESS CARRIED NO REPORTS ON THE FORCED EVACUATION OF PHNOM PENH (UNTIL ITTEFAG PICKED UP THE STORY FROM TIME ON MAY 24), THE CONGRESSIONAL SUPPORT GIVEN THE MAYAGUEZ RESCUE MISSION, OR THE SOVIET WORLD-WIDE NAVAL MANEUVERS. WE SUSPECT THAT WIRE SERVICE REPORTS ARE BEING HELD BACK, IF NOT CENSORED, BY THE DISTRIBUTING AGENCIES HERE -- THE GOVERNMENT-OWNED BSS AND THE ENA. AT A MINIMUM THESE AGENCIES ARE BEING HIGHLY SELECTIVE IN WHAT THEY DISSEMINATE; ONE SOURCE TELLS US THAT BSS CHECKS OUT TREATMENT OF CONTROVERSIAL STORIES WITH MFA. MORE-OVER, USIS HAS HAD LESS SUCCESS OF LATE IN PLACING ITS RELEASES; FEW PAPERS USED A USIS ITEM ON V-E DAY, IN SHARP CONTRAST TO THE FULL-PAGE DISPLAYS OF SOVIET AND BLOC STORIES ON WORLD WAR II.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 DACCA 02641 02 OF 02 300844Z

9. COMMENT. FREEDOM OF THE PRESS HAS HISTORICALLY BEEN FRAGILE HERE; THERE IS NO REAL TRADITION OF AN INDEPENDENT PRESS CORPS AND NEWSPAPERS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN EASILY INTIMIDATED. MOREOVER, AS MUJIB SEEMS WELL AWARE, JOURNALISTS IN BANGLADESH ARE APPARENTLY MORE CONCERNED WITH THEIR JOBS THAN THEIR INDEPENDENCE. THE LEVEL OF PROFESSIONALISM IS LOW AND BANGALEE JOURNALISTS ARE USED TO WORKING UNDER RESTIRCTIONS. HENCE THE FLOCKING OF JOURNALISTS TO BAKSAL WAS MORE LIKELY MOTIVATED BY A DESIRE TO PROTECT THEIR JOBS THAN TO SUPPORT THE PARTY. AS FOR THE EDITORS AND PUBLISHERS, MUJIB IS ATTEMPTING TO ACCOMMODATE MANY OF THEM THROUGH HIS ARRANGEMENT OF SPECIAL-INTEREST WEEKLIES. THE APPEARANCE OF VOLUNTARY ACQUIESCENCE IN THE PRESS CONSOLIDATION IS IMPORTANT TO MUJIB AND UNDERLINES HIS EFFORT TO OBTAIN ITTEFAG'S COOPERATION. HE REALIZE THAT THE TAKEOVER OF ITTEFAG, MORE THAN ANY OTHER NEWSPAPER, WOULD SYMBOLIZE THE END OF ANY INDEPENDENT PRESS IN BANGLADESH. WHATEVER THE FUTURE OF ITTEFAG, HOWEVER, WE EXPECT THAT SOON MUJIB WILL CARRY OUT HIS PRESS REORGANIZATION AND, IN THE NAME OF NATIONAL UNITY, END WHAT LITTLE IS LEFT OF FREEDOM OF THE PRESS IN BANGLADESH. THUS A FURTHER AVENUE OF LEGITIMATE DISSENT WILL BE CLOSED AND FURTIVELY DISTRIBUTED HANDBILLS WILL BECOME THE ONLY OUTLET FOR OPPOSITION JOURNALISTS.BOSTER

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